Aran Sweaters / Marie And Me

They became the ‘rage.’ To own an ‘Aran Sweater,’ you felt that the height of fashion was reached. Half a crown from my two pounds pay would buy two balls of cream Aran Wool. So the knitting began. Over the many weeks the knitting needles were in use most of my winter evenings.

It was perfect. The diamond pattern running down the centre of that finished jumper was so good. My mother was flabbergasted.

Marie insisted that she should have one too. We wore them on their first outing to mass. By then I knew there would be no more knitted by me. Those tedious hours perfecting the pattern was over.

Sitting in the middle of the ‘gallery,’ we could spy all the boys. The ones we liked and dreamed of romancing. The first in Keady to wear those ‘Aran Sweaters.’ Proudly promoted by Tommy Makem that famous folk singer from our town.

Returning from communion there was no room to sit again beside Marie. I was forced to go

behind her. Afterwards kneeling, saying the prayers then sitting up to look over at the choir. Enjoying the chanting in Latin of those lovely hymns. Canon Penthony as usual was swinging his baton as he conducted the music.

To laugh or talk in chaple was frowned upon but I couldn’t help it as I saw the back of Marie’s sweater close up. The diamond pattern of the sweater was all askew. All zigzagged down to the waist. She must not have noticed it, was my first reaction. I began then to laugh. Heads turned to look as I tried to stifle that laughter.

Remembering the plan to re-knit that section of her jersey was forgotten. So I sweated trying to overcome the giddiness. The laughter as mass ended.

As others left the seating row the glances of disapproval, murmurings was so evident as I sat down again to ensure they all left.

Marie joined me then in my new row. We loved watching the people, especially the boys, the fashions worn by others. Noting no one else was wearing Aran Sweaters. We sat proudly as others admired our wear.

Not disclosing to my friend why I laughed, it was good to realise she was unaware of the flawed knit of her treasured jumper.

The crowds slowly dispersed as we whispered to each other and moved to the sloping end of the ‘gallery’ for a better view.

Mrs McVeigh we knew had a new baby recently as we spied her slowly, quietly stepping towards the side altar. The priest was coming out again with just his ‘stole’ around his neck over his black suit.

Annie I knew well. She was a customer in our chemist shop. Lovely woman, she was always cheerful and chatty. A happy person. We could see she was now morose, a little sad as her manner seemed quiet. Secret even.

Father Quinn prayed over her. Reading from a book or maybe a bible. Wondering what that secretive encounter was. Marie boldly asked another mother she knew as we wandered out to that sunny day.

It’s called ‘churching.’ It’s a custom of blessing after childbirth this ‘worldly’ mother announced.

It recalls the ‘purification’ of the Blessed Virgin Mary she continued. A Jewish practice too. By then we ‘tuned’ out of her lengthy facts of that episode.

At fifteen we knew all the facts of life. Most of them learned by chance. Marie was more astute than me. Remembering she informed me of how mothers got babies, “It is just like the cows on my uncle’s farm. I see them all the time,” she continued. “The male cow moves close to the female.” She spared no detail. “You work it out,” she added. “But you should be married first,” us humans. We were dismayed by the ‘churching.’ It seemed to us

that Annie only, not her husband, had committed some sort of sin.

That day reminded me of my mother’s reaction to my wearing a mini skirt to the ceili. She was trying to protect me. Surely she was unaware of my now knowledge of all aspects of the human body. ‘The facts of life,’ as nursing tutoring was well underway in our ‘School of Nursing.’ That final comment. “You look like a trollop.”

Marie and I are still friends. Although more distant now but when we meet the stories of long ago keep coming back. How we saved ‘half a crown,’ a week to pay for our white leather roller

boots. How we learned the ‘facts of life.’ The wearing of the ‘Aran Sweaters.’

When she disclosed her awareness of the diamond pattern mistake on hers. “I so loved having that jumper,” she adds, it didn’t matter. I’ll always remember that day, sitting in the ‘gallery,’ spying all those handsome boys. The lovely music of the choir. That ‘churching,’ sermon. Now a thing of the past.